

VZCZCXRO5188  
RR RUEHGR  
DE RUEHSP #0602/01 1351841  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 151841Z MAY 06 ZDK  
FM AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6850  
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PORT OF SPAIN 000602

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DEPT FOR WHA/CAR, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [TD](#)

SUBJECT: PASTOR HINN'S SECOND COMING TESTS T&T'S  
RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

¶1. SUMMARY: Controversial Pentecostal Pastor Benny Hinn is scheduled for a second trip to Trinidad and Tobago in May. His "Miracle Mission" has occasioned significant dispute in the press, with Hindu leader Sat Maharaj using his media outlets to question Hinn's ministry as a sort of revenge for comments Hinn made in ¶1999. The Inter-Religious Organization, which serves as an ecumenical council that operates based on consensus did not support Maharaj's demand that Hinn be barred from coming, but did suggest that Hinn should avoid casting aspersions on other faiths. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Controversial Pentecostal Pastor Benny Hinn, based in Dallas, TX, is slated for a second mission to Trinidad and Tobago on May 19-21. His well-publicized trip has generated quite some controversy, primarily originating with the outspoken head of the Hindu community, Sat Maharaj. Hinn first came to T&T in 1999, likewise on a three-day "Miracle Mission," which involved large public assemblies in the central Queen's Park Savannah at which Hinn performed his trademark (and much disputed) miracle healings. Hinn attracted the ire of the Hindu community when he reportedly said in 1999 that T&T was a "Voodoo country," "full of demons" and equated adherents of Hinduism with pagans. Maharaj writes a weekly editorial in one of the daily newspapers, has his hands in at least two of the weekly papers, and has used these journalistic platforms to exact his vengeance by generating bad press for Hinn.

¶3. Hinn is coming at the invitation of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies, T&T branch. Once they announced the dates for Hinn's mission, Maharaj mounted a campaign to discredit Him. Maharaj published excerpts from the transcript of a December 27, 2002 "Dateline NBC" expose, highlighting Hinn's dubious accounting practices and questioning claims of miracle healings attributed to Hinn. Further, Maharaj has called for Hinn's arrest upon arrival under the Summary Offenses Act for his previously divisive and offensive language [NOTE: This Act has reportedly been used in the past to handle offensive stage performers, but we have been unable to track down the specific legal precedent. END NOTE]. To this end, Maharaj wrote a letter to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of National Security, and published his letters in the papers.

¶4. Maharaj took his case to the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), arguing that Hinn should not be allowed to come to T&T because he will exacerbate tensions among religions. The IRO, which has representatives from some 20 different faiths in T&T, including Muslims, Christians and Hindus, did not come to consensus on the issue. Instead, the IRO suggested that Hinn, and the mission's local organizers, be

sensitized to the religious diversity in the country and requested that Hinn refrain from making derogatory remarks about any of the other religions. Brother Noble Khan, an Independent Senator and Secretary of the IRO by way of his affiliation with the Trinidad Muslim League, sympathized with Maharaj, and quipped that if Hinn had said those things about Muslims, they would be equally put out. However, Khan maintained that T&T is a tolerant country overall, and that Hinn should be given an opportunity to speak here, as should any other missionary. Spiritual Baptist Archbishop Barbara Gray-Burke stated that she felt hurt by Hinn's comments, since the "voodoo" remark could refer to her faith as well, but that he should come and follow guidelines set out by the IRO so as to avoid insulting other religions and to not sow division among the different faiths in the country. The organizers are proceeding with their plans, and have largely stayed out of discussions about Hinn's previous statements.

15. COMMENT: Composed as it is of some strong personalities, the IRO has the unenviable task of maintaining T&T's interfaith concord. Its policy of taking decisions only by consensus allows the different confessions to have their own positions in most issues, and emphasizes that any decisions taken by the IRO affect all religions. The IRO maintained a difficult balance by articulating the values of openness and tolerance while not granting carte blanche for missionaries to denigrate other religions. Hinn will undoubtedly be on notice that any untoward comments on this trip could exacerbate religious tensions in Trinidad and Tobago. END COMMENT.

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